

## **THE NATURE OF GOD: Finding Your Own Way**

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A famous poet once went into a lecture hall to hear a learned astronomer speak. The topic was of interest to him and he tried to listen carefully, but the words went on and on and on. Finally, he left the hall to wander out under the night sky. There, the stars and the silence spoke to him more profoundly than all the words he had just been hearing. I confess that I begin this article with the wish that I could just leave my reader to those stars. I trust the intuitive and intensely individualized knowing which can well up within us as we contemplate them. Words alone can never embody the vastness of the Infinite. My complaint with most essays on this subject, which must use sentences and paragraphs full of words, is that they construct definitions of God which feel too small to me. Can I hope to do any better? Am I capable of describing the traps we build for our thinking without constructing one myself or falling into same! This is the challenge in the paragraphs which follow.

Most theologies posit a Creator God who has fashioned and set into motion a Creation. Explanations vary on what comes next. Some have a scenario in which God is in total control, there is a Divine Plan ever unfolding, obedience and humility are the greatest virtues we humans can demonstrate, and when we arrive at the predestined and inevitable climax or ending, wrongdoers will suffer everlasting punishment and the good will be lifted up to a state of eternal reward. In other tales, the Creator God alternates between periods of sublime indifference to his Creation and times of intense focus, often expressed as anger. A need is seen to correct, punish, or effect a sweeping change and God's Will is the explanation for flood or fire or other catastrophes. The intermittent nature of God's attention creates a series of fresh opportunities for humankind to start again, as we acknowledge the justice of the punishment. In this scenario, more free will is operating but it constantly leads us astray as we make choices that do not reflect God's priorities. Making these choices away from the Plan for our lives is seen as the essence of sinning and confronted with our history of doing this again and again, we can only accept the reality of a sinful nature. Confession, expiation and/or the acceptance of a redemptive act which clears the soul slate for all who will acknowledge its power, is seen as the pathway toward renewed virtue. There are more scenarios, of course, in other cultures but these are the ones with which I grew up and which have provoked a need in me to find my way to alternative perspectives. I will borrow a famous teaching story, or koan, from one of the other cultures, however, to explain my attitude toward these familiar theories.

It is said that the Buddha was conversing with a group of his disciples one day when one of them pointed out that what he was saying contradicted an earlier teaching of his. The Buddha agreed that it did and this distressed the young disciple. "Don't you believe in your own teachings?" he asked. "No," smiled the Buddha, and he proceeded to tell this story. A traveler came to the edge of a rushing river which he could neither ford nor swim across. He despaired until he noticed some sticks of wood nearby. Collecting them, he fashioned a raft, and set out for the opposite shore. He nearly drowned a thousand times, but he finally made it. He was grateful for the way the raft had facilitated him, but his gratitude did not cause him to bind the raft to his back and bear it with him from that time forward.

Using the raft as a metaphor for any teaching which helps me get from one place in my understanding to another, I know I have had need of many of them during my spiritual journey. I am everlastingly grateful for each one as it manifested, but once its purpose was fulfilled, I have felt no need to carry it along intact for possible future need. I trust to the resource that I know is always at hand to

provide the sticks I need just when a new one must be fashioned. I want to travel the path as unhampered as possible. But neither will I curse or otherwise disdain any plank in a past construction which helped my understanding at that time. Nor will I say that some of the wood I may have rejected in fashioning my own raft will not serve another on his journey. It has been important to me to be rigorous in discerning between the journey with its goal of spiritual realization and the concepts or constructs along the way which help to convey us from one state of awareness to another. Sometimes we build these for ourselves but more often they are proffered ready-made and intended as helpful by others. And, indeed, they may be tremendously helpful but they are still rafts, still just a means to proceed and not an end in themselves. To be blessed by us, yes, but not to be bound to us. In their origins, they were each of them man-made.

My discomfort with the familiar religious scenarios starts with my inability to separate a Creator from the Creation. God Is, and for me, Isness is Godness. Therefore, it follows that all Isness, or All That Is, is divinity expressing Itself. Creator and Creation meld into one expanding, limitless vitality I prefer to call the Creative. I live and move and have my being within and as a part of this Creativity. The Quakers tell us there is that of God within each one of us. I would add that each one of us is within God, and that there is no place where God is not. But as we encounter that which strikes us as horrendous or despicable in our world, this means it cannot be interpreted as an absence of God. We are challenged to stretch our present understanding and perhaps to strip away the sentimental and the superficial aspects of ideas about good and evil. I am still learning how this can be done and one of my rafts to get me over to a new perspective contained the thought that evil might actually be the mid-point in a changing good.

When divine energy is expressing itself as all-encompassing Creativity there is tremendous freedom in which multiple Plans may unfold. Some of them may evolve into the “happy ending” we have come to require after centuries of emotional conditioning, and others may not. But the latter may be even more useful in promoting the spiritual growth that is ever the goal of our journey. I once fantasized that I could create a “perfect world” and, of course, it contained no poverty, no wars, no illness, no famine—in fact, nothing that could disturb the well-being or the tranquility of its inhabitants. For a brief, happy time I contemplated my imaginary creation. Then it dawned on me that I was contemplating something very static, in that there were no major challenges or “crying needs” to draw forth creativity from my comfortable citizens. Furthermore, staticness became a positive requirement because if changes were allowed something less than perfection might gain momentum. I began to appreciate the way a real Utopia might require a lot of control on someone’s part, first, to bring about a perfect state, and second, in order to maintain it. It could easily pave the way for a dictatorship and glorious “ends” could be held up as justification for employing cruel and repressive “means.”

My understanding of free will expanded and my appreciation deepened for the non-Utopian state of our world. We must have freedom for Creative experiments, ones which appear to fail as well as those which meet with success. We are allowed to learn for ourselves what works and what doesn’t in whichever direction our striving takes us. And who is to judge from finite perspective the real contribution which might have been made through a so-called “failure”? The Creative process involves tearing down as well as building up. A truly benevolent God allows us to be in charge of that process, participating in it at the very core of our Beingness, but never hampering us in our expression of the personal Creative. Slowly I replaced all those options which had been deleted from my original creation and now I had an even more perfect world, one in which free will could operate to lead us anywhere we chose. And the perfect world which resulted was, of course, the image of the one we are already living in.

In the scenarios which emphasize the separation between God and human beings, we are told that this is the result of our inherent sinfulness. Whether this is a legacy handed down from our first forebears in a literalistic interpretation of the Garden of Eden story or more recent ponderings on the doctrine of Original Sin, the bottom line is the same. In our natural state, we are unworthy, they tell us. God's love may be seen as boundless but we cannot avail ourselves of it, say the separatists, until we confess that there is no good in us and throw ourselves upon his mercy. No good in us? We could not recognize a good which exists outside ourselves unless we had an aspect of that good within us. If I am indeed created in the image and likeness of God, why should I be called upon to denigrate all the potential for good within that gift of life. Part of a popular motto proclaims, "God don't make no junk," as an affirmation of the worthiness abiding within even the most disorganized individual, and I agree. I have never found that innate sinfulness was a concept I could use in one of my rafts, but rather I have found the opposite idea vastly facilitating.

Suppose our destiny was to discover that we are each birthright citizens of the Kingdom of God? No matter how cleverly we obscure this from our mundane consciousness, no matter how long it takes or how many stages of preliminary studies, rituals, creedal affirmations or whatever, that our human ingenuity devises as obstacles to any immediate acceptance, suppose this was the truth. Would it make us stop using the excuse, "after all, I'm only human," and begin to think, "after all, I AM divine"? If that which we focus upon, we strengthen, then how do we mobilize that tremendous potential to be and to do the best that we know, when the focus is all on the negative within? I cherish the thought that we are projections, holograms if you will, not so much of an "image and likeness," but arising from the imagining and loveness of the Creative which some call God. The true spiritual teacher puts us in touch with our powerful origin.

At one time when I was curious as to how others had described their beliefs, I read about a variety of deisms and theisms. I decided the only theism which might be appropriate for me was one which was not on the list. Knowing the root of the word enthusiasm was *en theos*, or literally, "the god within," I thought I could risk calling myself an *entheist*—someone who believes that Godness is at the center of every manifestation, whether I understand its appropriateness or not. I am not a pantheist who worships gods of many creeds or cults indifferently, nor who believes that there is no God but the combined forces and laws of nature. There is but one Creative for me, yet my oneness is not to be defined as the Only; rather, it is the All. As the All, it is far more than mere natural law and is not limited to our Universe in manifesting. The most ringing phrase in all the biblical texts for me is that which issues forth from the burning bush identifying itself to Moses as "I AM THAT I AM." We can never begin to understand that I-Amness until we explore something of our own I AM, for it is expressing itself through the I AM in us. An "objective" view of God is illusory. God is experienced subjectively. Unlike a physical journey which starts from a "here" and leads us to a distant "there," the spiritual quest finds us diffused and scattered over our inner landscape at the beginning and gradually leads us to a centering in the Eternal Here and Now. No one else can say your I AM for you in a way that represents your essence and power. I AM can be rightly said only by a centered self for only then does the assertion ring with joy.

Any overview of our religious history reveals a shift in emphasis from a view of God as a distant, almost unapproachable, sovereign power who was capable of swift and terrible angers, toward the concept of a caring heavenly father who is aware of all our innermost thoughts. I see these as man-originated images which say far more about humanity's stage of understanding and its needs than they contribute to any description of the Creative. The early Hebrews felt embattled and they needed a partisan god who would lead them to military triumph over the enemy tribes and their gods. They produced some glorious psalms

and writings in his honor which have been rafts for my journey as I came across them in the Old Testament and the Talmud.

Now Bible scholars tell us that many of the passages are mistranslated or otherwise in error and I watch as my rafts of the past break up and many of the sticks swirl away. But in the process my faith is not troubled or shaken a whit. My revelations were never contained within the words but happened to me as the words led me into spaces beyond them. They were an agency, a wonderful aid but not the experience which they facilitated. The validity of those insights which were the result of experience can never be dismissed on the basis of a faulty vehicle. It got me across a river; it fulfilled its purpose and now it is easy to bless it and let it go. Even a passage completely misunderstood can spark a valid awakening to deeper issues. Let the scholars have their Creative fun. All the words still fall far short in describing the new ground ahead of us if we are to evolve from sheep into shepherds.

I hear much talk of the triune nature of God and again I feel the limitations of the description. The Creative is so multi-faceted it would be impossible to put a number to the variety of manifestations. Instead, I hear a progress report on the ways we relate to the divine. The Father aspects represents the attitude of obeisance to a distant authority. We built altars and bowed down in rows before them, but the front row was always getting up and turning around and telling the rest of us what the Deity wanted from us. Mostly, it turned out to be sacrifices of various kinds: animals, fruits of the field, gold, silks and the like. The altars grew more beautiful and the people in the front row got fatter. Then the Son aspect arrived and walked among us as a God-Man and much of our energy was diverted from placating a distant Deity to imitating the example life placed in our midst. Wonderful things happened to those who became aware of their own potentials as they learned to love one another as He had loved them. The story of that life, told and retold through the centuries since, has influenced millions on their own spiritual journeys and the image of gentle strength in the one called Jesus has altered the assumptions about anger easily roused in the Father.

But if we are to keep on growing, there is a step beyond imitating, no matter how beautiful the example before us. Maybe Jesus in his role as teacher was not encouraging us to be LIKE him, but to BE like him, to get inside our own Being and start radiating the same intensity of energy, but in our own individuated expression of it. The concept of the Holy Spirit is open-ended enough to carry the burden of characterizing a new phase in relating to the divine. A very important possibility is that mankind in general will step aside from intimidating structures which are unresponsive to change, whether these are religious, political or social. All spiritual hierarchies have been created from below, that is, by someone who views himself as being on the bottom rung or even beneath it. We need not see them as divinely ordained from on high, and their rigidities, impassivities and narrowly focused self-interest, wherever it occurs, does not merit continuing unquestioning sustainment. When we become self-responsible radiant Suns of God we may find looser, less formal organizations to be more helpful in facilitating outreach than the formal institutions heavily bound to tradition.

Ultimately, mystical experiences may be the only nontheoretical way in which we form our impressions of the nature of God. Here is where “the peace which passeth understanding” becomes a reality to us. We experience true timelessness as all the pressures associated with the earth plane vanish. Our questions are stilled as we KNOW that all is well no matter what the superficial appearance might be. Integrity, or the state of being complete, undivided, unbroken, unimpaired, sound and pure, partakes of us and we of it, in wordless communion. Gone are the anxieties about beginnings or endings. Gone are the inventions of our clever minds, our Creation myths, our apocalyptic denouements, our pathways, our steps,

our learning ladders. . . we have reached the trackless field of truth. There is no need of beginner's exercises now. We are one with that which has always been, is now, and evermore shall be in worlds and worlds without end.

Don't take my words as anything but encouragement to you to find your own way toward a sense of the nature of God. I promise you that it will be a Creative experience. If there have been any sticks here with which you can fashion your own raft, I am grateful. A last word; do go out and contemplate a night sky and the stars. The poet in you will respond to their message more profoundly than to words.